

## Review of *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* by Onno Oerlemans (Columbia University Press)

by Anne Llewellyn Morgan | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Onno Oerlemans's *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* offers a wide-ranging exploration of the different ways animals figure in poetry. Grounded in close readings of selected poems, the book considers in turn poetry that treats animals as allegorical figures, symbols of nature, representatives of a species, and individual beings. Oerlemans argues that reading poetry about animals models how to cultivate careful attention to the natural world. He also argues that poetry can complicate the divide between humans and other animals. The book is recommended for scholars embarking on animal studies projects and for use in the classroom.

**KEYWORDS** literary studies

*Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human*. By Onno Oerlemans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 238 (hardback). ISBN 9780231159548. US List: \$60.00.

There have been many books analyzing the role of animals in literature over the past decade, but Onno Oerlemans's *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* manages to offer something new. Oerlemans argues that poetry is uniquely suited to contemplating and reevaluating the relationship between humans and other animals, opening avenues of thought unavailable to either science or philosophy. He considers poems from different eras and genres but concentrates on poetry written in English. Although *Poetry and Animals* is grounded in theoretical work on critical animal studies, the real strength of the book is Oerlemans's close reading of poems, a practice which cultivates the kind of sustained attention and care that is also the basis of an ethical relationship with the natural world.

The first chapter, "The Animal in Allegory: From Chaucer to Gray," critiques the way fables represent animals, primarily as symbols of human vice and virtue. Rather than using pre-Romantic allegorical poetry as a foil for later realistic depictions of animals, Oerlemans showcases examples that suggest good poets have always seen complexity in the boundaries between humans and animals. "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Geoffrey Chaucer's fable about a rooster in *The Canterbury Tales*, plays with allegorical conventions by frequently reminding the reader of the protagonist's rooster-ness, particularly in vivid descriptions of his feathers and mating behavior. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is an important poem, Oerlemans argues, because "it does so much to draw attention to the animality of its characters and to connect its allegorical meanings to the unstable divide between

human and animal" (36). He reserves opprobrium for a later poem, calling Thomas Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat," a mock-tragic poem from the eighteenth century, "one of the cruelest animal fables I have encountered" (48). Oerlemans's disapproval stems not from choice of subject matter—a cat drowning in a goldfish vase—but from the way the cat's death is misogynistically allegorized as punishment for female vanity. Close reading and attention to animals can produce refreshing moral clarity.

In the second chapter, "Poems of the Animal," Oerlemans considers poetry that addresses the idea of animality. He argues that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is less interested in the unlucky albatross either as an individual or species than in the mariner's killing of it as "an act of malice on a representative of the animal world" (57). Coleridge's poem is also a kind of allegory that uses animals to posit a moral about human virtue, but specifically virtuous relations with others, including other species: "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast." Poems of the animal "reflect our need for a kind of respite from our increasingly urbanized, denaturalized, and environmentally threatened culture" (73). Poetry helps us heal our broken relationship with the natural world.

Oerlemans's third chapter, "Poetry as a Field Guide," turns to poems that focus on a species. Examples of this poetic genus include Emily Dickinson's "You'll know Her—by Her Foot," which is a sort of riddle designed for readers to recognize a bird they probably already know: the American robin. He also examines Marianne Moore's poems "The Jerboa" and "The Pangolin," poems that introduce readers to more obscure creatures. By thinking about these poems dedicated to particular species, Oerlemans resists the impulse of critical thought to reject taxonomies. Instead, Oerlemans builds on work by environmental thinkers such as Aldo Leopold who believe "names and naming are also an essential part of an environmental ethic" (85). As the title of the chapter suggests, there is some similarity between these poetic projects and birdwatching. One of John Clare's bird poems, for instance, teaches the reader how to differentiate a blackcap from a nightingale, which makes a similar song. Oerlemans suggests that "poetry foregrounds the pleasure and power of this act of naming" (87).

The fourth chapter examines "The Individual Animal in Poetry." Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "The Moose," for example, is not about moose as a species but a particular moose whose large presence stops a bus filled with delighted passengers: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" Lyric poetry frequently memorializes encounters, and this chapter argues there is an ethical dimension to how we experience and remember encounters with animals. Bishop's poem and others like it suggest that "each encounter is a powerful confirmation of the idea that there may be happiness when we peacefully meet the gaze, and address the existence of, another individual creature" (138). These poems, many of them about pets, consider the unique subjectivities of non-human animals. What poetry offers in place of philosophical thought or ethical deliberation is a deep and continuous attention to the individual animal, a focus that reveals both the similarities and important differences between humans and other species.

In the final chapter, "Of Hybridity and the Hybrid," Oerlemans most directly engages with poems that, as the subtitle of the book promises, blur boundaries with the human. Oerlemans argues that poetry can transcend distinctions between human and animal imposed by science and philosophy. He presents Les Murray's "Bat's Ultrasound" as a poetic response to the philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous essay, "What it's Like to Be a Bat." Nagel suggests humans can never truly know what it's like to be a bat, but Murray's

poem gives it an honest try, crafting nonsense syllables representing the soundscape of bats' high-pitched echolocation. The poem's references to a human musical scale, however, actually seem to prove Nagel's thesis that we can only know what it would be like for a human to be a bat, not what it's like for a bat to be a bat. Nagel and Oerlemans would probably agree, though, that no one can understand what it's like to be a bat just by learning scientific facts about them. As Oerlemans argues earlier in his book, poetry's definitions of animals "are frequently informed by science but do vastly different work" (25). *Poetry and Animals* argues poetic imagination can take us further in understanding animals than science alone.

Because of its breadth, *Poetry and Animals* is a good resource for someone starting on a more specialized project in animal studies and poetry—such as birds in nineteenth-century lyric—to get a sense of potential analogous works from different historical periods. Its clear prose and methods of close reading also make it highly suitable for the classroom as a model of how to honestly and generously encounter both poetry and animals.

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